

How Hunger Staged a Comeback

By Richard J. Margolis

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Hunger in America Had Been Virtually Eliminated. Then the Government Began Undoing Effective Programs—And Created a Crisis That Seems to Be Out of Control

Strolling up Sheridan Road in Chicago one April morning, I come upon a silent queue of elderly women and men leaning into the chill wind that blows off Lake Michigan. Nearby a humpty-dumpty of a man, not much younger than the others, stokes a trashcan fire with empty cardboard cartons. The boxes bear a charred warning: "Not to be sold or exchanged—USDA."

The city is getting ready to distribute federal surplus cheese to some of its down-and-old citizens, an exercise made possible by Congress's 1981 enactment of the Special Food Distribution Program, which authorizes the charitable disposal of certain farm products piling up in government bins and warehouses. Today's cheese comes in five-pound bricks. It is yellow, pasteurized and loaded with cholesterol.

"What's everybody waiting for?" I ask Humpty Dumpty.

"They're waiting for the police lady to open up. She's got the key."

I ask if the police lady is late.

"She's not late and she's not early," he tells me. "When she comes, she comes. And please don't ask me no more questions. I'm just a part-time person."

There is some muttering and jostling at the rear of the line. A black man with gray hair and a white goatee is feebly defending his turf against an aged newcomer. Humpty Dumpty makes a megaphone of his pudgy hand. "Randy," he shouts, "you better behave or you don't get no cheese."

The police lady arrives soon after. Within 30 minutes everyone has received some cheese and started home. I walk north alongside a small woman who wears a white kerchief on her head. She turns out to be a brisk walker and talker.

"My name is Marie Finley," she says, "and I turned 78 last month. It was a very nice birthday. A neighbor made me a small cake. I'm going to give some of this cheese to my neighbors. It's too much for one person, that's for sure, but I can use some of it. I missed getting the cheese this winter because it was too cold to stand in line. Didn't pick up my food stamps either—afraid I'd catch pneumonia."

"Then what did you do for food?" I inquire.

"That's easy. I went without."

"Some of our older residents have resorted to shop-lifting to keep from going hungry. God help us for letting this happen."

Miss Finley tells me that all her days she has had difficulty making ends meet. It is not a complaint, just a fact of her life: "I've never been married and I've always supported myself 'til I took sick. I worked mostly in restaurants and I made beds at that college in Evanston. It was hard work always, but it was a living."

Now she gets \$373 a month from Social Security, or just under \$4,500 a year. The total lifts her a shade above the official poverty line while allowing her to collect \$25-worth of food stamps each month. She used to get more stamps, before Ronald Reagan and the Congress slashed anti-hunger expenditures, between 1981 and 1984, by more than \$12 billion. Miss Finley voted for Reagan both times, but lately she has been having second thoughts. "I can't see those cuts," she says. "People need stamps to keep up their strength."

At the corner of Sheridan and Eastwood Marie Finley and I prepare to part company. She is anxious to get back to her room, to slice up her cheese and give it away. "There are people in my building," she says, "who haven't eaten since Tuesday." Today is Thursday.

Standing in Line

I came to Chicago to learn more about the spread of hunger among elderly Americans, and one of the things I learned was that if you are hungry, you must stand in line. That is how we and our government have arranged matters at soup kitchens, food stamp centers and surplus commodity depots. The message seems clear enough: queue up or waste away.

"Members of this distinguished panel," pleaded a Chicago psychologist, Dr. John Weliczko, in testimony to a group of Illinois legislators, ". . . someone needs to reinforce the idea that it is painful to stand in line for cheese. Psychologically, people hurt when they wait in line. Ask them."

In Hartford, reports Sybil Nassau of Meals-on-Wheels, a 72-year-old woman angrily explained why she could not take advantage of a free cheese distribution: "How can I stand in line at the senior center to register for the damn cheese if I can't stand up long enough to wash my face at the sink?"

I have stood for hours alongside octogenarians patiently waiting to be "processed." As often as not the applicant is clutching a "Proof of Citizenship" or some other document that might unlock the door to urgently needed groceries—a rent receipt, a utility bill, a marriage license or a divorce decree. The laws are complex, the rules are legion. Who

but the hungry could be expected to penetrate their mysteries? "I been here twice already this week," an elderly woman in Miami told me cheerfully. "Never remember what paper they want."

Sister Judy Birgen of the Chicago Catholic Charities has waited with her clients in many food stamp centers. "You have to stand around in smoky rooms full of drunks and screaming babies," she says. "You have to come back at least three times. The senior citizens are pushed around the most."

On the first of each month in Greenwood, Mississippi, people begin queuing up as early as 5 a.m., hoping to collect their month's supply of stamps before the door is locked tight at 10. Sometimes it rains and sometimes it snows—but no one runs for cover.

Even Mrs. Lewis, a 78-year-old black woman who suffers from arthritis, endured the cold rain one March morning in order to get her \$30-worth of stamps. Afterwards, her daughter Gloria told me, Mrs. Lewis's shoulder and knee joints became painfully inflamed and she had to go to a clinic in Jackson for relief. The clinic visit and the hired ride back and forth cost her \$45.

Patterns of Endurance

The causes of elderly hunger are many and malign, and all seem part of a fatally humdrum drama. Each blow from within or without—illness, isolation, inflation—narrows the sufferer's circle of sufficiency, bringing the hour of hunger that much nearer.

Carol Wetzel, a nutritionist who works for the state of Georgia, has posed the critical question: "A poor Georgian . . . must decide between eating decently and (having) heat. . . . She chooses to eat but catches pneumonia. Now what did she die of . . . ?" The road to elderly hunger, I discovered, is strewn with such impossible choices.

One afternoon in Arcadia, California, Mrs. Emma Blount, 73, showed me her "nerve pills," which cost her about \$35 a month. "When I buy the medicine," she said, "I have to either stop eating or stop heating." The hunger and the cold give her headaches, so she visits her doctor, and the doctor prescribes more pills. The cycle begins anew.

A report published by the Chicago Hunger Watch notes that "Food is often the need that is flexible and can be reduced. In fact, the need for cash sometimes leads the poor to sell the food that has been given them." A social worker in Marie Finley's neighborhood told me the aged poor often use food stamps to pay their rent. Fifty cents on the dollar is the going rate of exchange.

In parts of Appalachia and the rural South, hunger and the high cost of transportation appear in league with each other. I have met aged residents of those regions who do not collect their food stamps because they cannot afford a

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"taxi"—usually a neighbor's pickup truck—to take them to the welfare office. The trip may be as far as 40 miles each way and can cost as much as \$50.

Nor does the journey, once taken, necessarily put an end to the expense of quelling one's hunger; for now one must find a means of getting to the grocery store. In many such instances the sour solution is to exchange a portion of one's food stamps for a ride to the general store, where one can spend whatever stamps one has left.

The cutbacks in stamps have been especially hard on the frail and infirm. From the Hunger Watch report:

Mr. Selly R., suffering from a pituitary tumor, hypertension and diabetes, gets \$300 from Social Security, of which \$200 is now spent for rent. He needs nutritional meals; his food stamps have been cut from \$90 to \$60. . . . Helen S., age 83, with severe rheumatoid arthritis, gets \$284 from SSI. Her food stamps stopped coming; when reinstated they had been cut. . . . Another 83-year-old woman, who cares for a retarded son and a mentally ill daughter, pays \$250 a month for substandard housing with no hot water. She also has had her food stamps cut.

Susan Green, from Jackson, Mississippi, lost her food stamps when her knee acted up and she had to spend 12 days in a hospital. "I couldn't get to welfare to pick up the stamps," she said, "so they cut me off."

Her knee was injured in 1962, "when I talked back to a [white] bus driver. The bus was moving pretty fast, but that didn't make no difference to him; he pushed me out the door." In those days, she said, "the KKK was the devil here."

"Is there a devil here today?" I asked.

"Well, if there is, he's down at the welfare."

The elderly poor seemed resigned to hunger without actually surrendering to it. If their words bespoke acceptance, the acceptance often had an edge to it—a gentle sting of protest or disenchantment. Here are some brief exchanges drawn from my notes and tapes.

An aged woman on Chicago's North Side:

Q. When you run out of food, how do you get through the day?

A. I sleep late and I go to bed early. I try to sleep through meal times.

Q. What do you dream about?

A. I'll give you three guesses.



A woman in Jackson, Mississippi:

Q. What do you do when you run out of milk?

A. I drink water.

An 82-year-old man in Los Angeles, a Meals-on-Wheels client:

Q. What do you do on weekends, when there is no Meals-on-Wheels?

A. I save bits of my meal every day—a piece of meat here, a scoop of applesauce there. That way I'm set for weekends, can't you see?

A 69-year-old woman who lives in rural Alabama. She collects 7 in food stamps and \$377 in Social Security:

Q. Have you ever run out of food?

A. Oh, lots of times. That's when I get a little few green peas from my children. I eats 'em 'til I tire of 'em.

Q. What did you have for lunch today?

A. Boiled green peas.

Q. And what do you plan to have for supper?

A. (laughing): No sense askin' me that. You know what I'm fixin' to say.

An aged woman who lives in a Boston rooming house:

Q. What do you usually have for supper?

A. Cold tuna fish is my favorite. But I can't hold the can opener because of my arthritis.

Q. Then how do you manage?

A. I wait till I hear footsteps in the hall. Then I yell, "Help! I'm trapped inside a can of tuna fish!"

How Hunger Staged a Comeback

Since Ronald Reagan began supping at the White House, the hunger lines in welfare offices have noticeably lengthened, their ranks swelled not only by the aged but by millions of children and their unemployed parents—the so-called "new poor" who lost their jobs during the 1982 recession and in many instances never regained full employment.

It was not just the recession that caused the fresh wave of hunger pangs, for Congress and the administration managed to make matters much worse. They chose that oddly inappropriate moment to let go of the safety net, actually *reducing* major federal food benefits. No program was spared: not the school lunch program, not the nutrition services provided by the Women, Infants and Children program (WIC), and certainly not the food stamp program, which for a decade had been hunger's most steadfast enemy.

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The cutbacks wiped out years of diligent effort to eliminate hunger and malnutrition in America, an idea that had taken on substance in 1970, the year that Congress made food stamps a national program; it had gathered strength seven years later, after Congress dropped the stamp purchase requirement, thereby enabling millions of new participants, who had been too poor under the old rules, to receive stamps.

It was not long before such measures began to pay off. A government-sponsored National Food Consumption Survey in 1977 found marked improvement in the diets of low-income people over results of a similar survey taken a decade earlier.

Another pair of before-and-after studies, conducted by the Field Foundation, yielded similarly encouraging results. "Our first and overwhelming impression," reported the Field investigators, "is that there are far fewer grossly malnourished people in this country than there were 10 years ago." The Field studies concluded that "the food stamp program does more to lengthen and strengthen the lives of disadvantaged Americans than any other . . . social program . . ."

What we had going for us, it appeared, was a national

success story of major proportions, one based on federal resources enlisted in the service of humane impulses. To put it another way, we had thrown money at the problem, and the problem had abated.

The Reagan Administration changed all that. By 1983 all but the willfully myopic could recognize the symptoms of a nationwide crisis that had been manufactured largely in Washington: the burgeoning of food pantries and soup kitchens, the heartbreaking queues, the mounting evidence of malnutrition among the very old and the very young. The Food Research and Action Center, an anti-hunger group in Washington, put the emergency in perspective. "The problem America nearly solved," it announced, "is back."

As a nation hooked on what Emerson called "the solid angularity of facts," we launched survey after survey, and each one confirmed our worst expectations. A Working Group on Domestic Hunger and Poverty, sponsored by the National Council of Churches, reported at the close of 1982 that hunger was "in some places four times worse than it was a year ago." In June, 1983, the U.S. Conference of Mayors declared hunger to be "probably the most prevalent and the most insidious problem" facing American cities.

Nothing in the way of civic compassion or private philanthropy seemed adequate to the challenge, which overwhelmed the best and the biggest of our social charities. A senior vice-president of United Way told the *National Journal* that "of all things we underestimated, the level of need stands out." A Salvation Army official voiced a fa-

miliar complaint: "We are the private sector President Reagan says will take up the slack, and we're getting killed."

Early in 1984, Second Harvest, a national network of food banks, tabulated its three-year battle against hunger: in 1981, its members had distributed 15.2 million pounds of food; in 1982, 30.3 million; in 1983, 45 million—and still the lines kept growing.

In Minneapolis, an ecumenical coalition mobilized the area's churches in a massive effort to feed the hungry, eventually collecting 1.8 million pounds of food. The enormous cache lasted just three weeks. In New Orleans calls for food assistance in the first nine months of 1982 shot up 222 percent: similar calls over similar periods rose 112 percent in Cleveland, 50 percent in Colorado's San Luis Valley, 400 percent in Detroit.

Even the relatively affluent suburbs could not escape the plague—and the elderly there seemed especially vulnerable. Loran Canada, an older woman living in Inglewood, California, told a Congressional committee, "I come from an area of middle-class seniors, and I think 5,000 of those seniors are slowly starving to death."

Walter Hoag, a food program director in the Cleveland suburb of Euclid, reported that "Our older residents in some instances have resorted to shop-lifting to keep from going hungry. God help us for letting this happen."

Hoag may have been calling on the only agent of assistance available at the time. Certainly the administration in Washington seemed unprepared to recognize the emergency, much less come to the rescue.

The President's chief counselor, Edwin Meese III, claimed to reporters on December 9, 1983, that most of the stories concerning hunger were merely "anecdotal." He had not seen any "authenticated accounts" and "I doubt that anyone else has."

Four days later the President himself took up the complacent theme, remarking at a White House press conference that people who lined up at soup kitchens did so not because they were hungry but because they wanted a free meal.

Paradoxical Measures

Any attempt to count the hungry must begin with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the largest and most labyrinthian of cabinet-level departments. For at least two decades the USDA has been playing a critical role in the lives of the poor. Its now-defunct "Economy Food Plan" remains to this day the basis of the government's official definition of poverty; its nutritionists and economists exert a strong voice in determining what foods poor people should buy and how much they should be allowed to eat.

More noteworthy still, the agency controls the only consistent form of currency available to the hungry—namely,

food stamps, which it distributes to poor people through social welfare agencies in all 50 states.

If we are to credit the official poverty line, the elderly poor are different from you and me: they need less money. That is because they are alleged to eat less than the rest of us. We define poverty in this country by estimating how much a low-budget family must spend annually for groceries, and then multiplying that sum by three, on the assumption that unaffluent households commit about one-third of their incomes to food.

The product of that multiplication becomes the official poverty threshold for a given year, or the level of annual income below which all households are deemed poor. Different allowances are made for different sizes of households (the bigger the family, the higher the threshold) and for the different ages of household members. And there's the rub.

Because the aged are considered to be more spartan food consumers, and because food consumption has been designated as the lone non-demographic variable, the line for elderly poverty has been set below that for other age groups. Depending on which group is being compared, the difference can run as high as 12 percent.

To put it another way, it is possible for someone to live *under* the poverty line at 64 and *over* it the following year, even when that person's income has not increased one cent beyond the cost-of-living index. In 1984, elderly poverty lines were drawn at \$4,958 for a single person and \$6,293 for a couple. Had the thresholds been squared with those of other age groups, about a half-million additional older Americans would have instantly become "poor."

Official poverty thresholds have been fixtures on our social welfare landscape since the mid-1960s. From the standpoint of the elderly poor, they have been a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the very existence of a quantifiable definition of poverty has provided reformers over the years with a benchmark of progress and retreat. Then, too, the poverty line has introduced a certain amount of order into our customarily chaotic national welfare enterprise and thus into the lives of its beneficiaries. So long as we insist on means-tested programs, justice demands a consistent, fair-minded sorting system.

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On the other hand, the poor overall and the aged poor especially have been locked into definitions not always relevant to their troubles. Most Americans, even poor Americans, no longer spend one-third of their incomes on groceries. In the two decades of rule by poverty lines, the costs of fossil fuels and of shelter have risen much more sharply than has the cost of food, with the result that the poverty definition has lost touch with today's pricing realities.

Another definitional defect bears directly on the hungry aged. They must continue to pay nutritional tribute to the USDA's longstanding belief that they eat less than we do and therefore require less income.

It is true that caloric demand often goes down as age goes up. People in their seventies and eighties, on average, seem to require about two-thirds of the calories they needed when they were younger. But calories are not nutrients—they do not necessarily contain minerals, vitamins and proteins—and there is little evidence to suggest that elderly persons require fewer nutrients.

In his Pulitzer-prize winning treatise on growing old in America, Dr. Robert N. Butler, the first director of the National Institute on Aging, notes that "The nutritional needs of the reasonably healthy elderly are really little different from those of younger people. They certainly need the same proteins, vitamins and minerals—perhaps in slightly smaller quantities, but even that is debatable." (*Why Survive?*, 1975.)

Dr. Robert M. Russell, who directs clinical research at Tufts University's new Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging, goes a step further. In his opinion, "the aged require a higher quality diet" than do members of other

age groups. But as Dr. Russell emphasized in our interview, "that is just my guess. The nutritional needs of the elderly have never been systematically examined."

Russell's hunch, however, is widely shared by physicians and dietitians, many of whom not unreasonably suspect that persons afflicted with brittle bones and chronic diseases may require a special dietary boost.

Whatever the merits or demerits of such arguments, it seems clear that the federal definition of poverty is based on at least two very shaky premises, and that both are related to food consumption. The poverty threshold fails to separate the hungry from the satiated, and thus fails as well to help us in our computations concerning hunger in America.

We turn now to another paradoxical measure of hunger—the food stamp program.

Flawed Index of Hunger

Consider the Harvard-based Physician Task Force on Hunger, which in 1983-84 made field trips to 14 states, including all of New England (but excluding the Far West). The Task Force's eye-opening study, published last Feb-

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ruary declares hunger to be “a national health epidemic” and estimates that “up to 20 million citizens may be hungry at least some period of time each month,” most commonly in the final week or two, when food stamps run out. The victims, moreover, fall “disproportionately at the ends of the age spectrum—the young and the old.”

The Task Force’s hunger count comes close to the actual number receiving food stamps each month—21 million, of whom about two million are elderly. The parallel is not a coincidence. Because benefit cuts have virtually mandated regularly recurring stamp shortages among all beneficiaries, the Task Force could with justice base its very conservative hunger estimates on totals drawn from the nation’s premier anti-hunger program. In the Reagan era, each food stamp beneficiary had become a countable victim.

Congress and the administration achieved that peculiar coupling via a series of subtle contrivances, which to this day few food stamp recipients have been able to decipher. The most telling was a 19-month postponement, beginning in late 1981, of a cost-of-food adjustment in stamp allotments, followed in 1983 by an adjustment set one percent *below* the actual inflation rate. More than any others, those manipulations guaranteed that food stamp benefits would not last an entire month.

In addition, Congress tightened eligibility standards, delayed emergency stamp benefits for the destitute and, in its apportionment of stamps, “rounded down” benefits to the nearest dollar, rather than up. (The change in direction cost each food stamp household between one and two dollars per month—no minor sacrifice for a family not knowing where its next meal was coming from.) By 1984,

maximum monthly stamp allocations—\$76 for a single person and \$139 for a couple—were lagging several points behind inflation, and most allocations fell short of the maximums.

Even before the Reagan reductions, however, food stamp levels seemed deplorably ungenerous, based as they were on the “Thrifty Food Plan,” the USDA’s substitute for its discarded Economy Food Plan. The Thrifty Food Plan is the least expensive of four family food budgets assembled by that agency, the others being labeled “Low-Cost,” “Moderate-Cost” and “Liberal.”

Strange Assumptions

The many suppositions behind the Thrifty Food Plan do not inspire confidence in its capacity to dispel hunger. Among other things, it assumes that each food stamp household spends 30 percent of its income on groceries priced at national averages.

It further assumes that families pay no sales taxes; that they waste practically no food (five percent presumed waste vs. a national average close to 25 percent); that they frequently buy in bulk and have freezers and storage space in which to lay away the surplus; that they possess working ovens, stoves, sinks and refrigerators; that they still have

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the capacity to use those appliances; that they can pay for the gas and the electricity; that they have all the equipment necessary to prepare meals "from scratch"; that they can find the time or summon the strength to spend up to two-and-a-half hours every day cooking meals; that they are able to read and understand cooking instructions (even when some of the USDA's recommended portions defy reason, e.g., three-quarters of an egg for breakfast); that they never go out to restaurants or on picnics, or crave snacks between meals, or wish to buy higher-priced ethnic food, or are under doctor's orders to stay on a therapeutic diet (sugarless, saltless, fatless) that often costs more.

Even the USDA admits its Thrifty Food Plan may be faulty if not entirely worthless. "Without specific nutritional skills or training," the department concedes in an official description of the plan, the average food buyer "would find it difficult to make the food choices which provide an adequate diet on the amount of money which represents the cost of the plan." In other words, any ordinary citizen attempting to apply the plan risks malnourishment.

The elderly poor face deadlier risks than most, for the lives that most of them lead seem quite beyond the comfortable bounds of official postulates. Certainly the old people I have visited in their cramped apartments and single rooms would be astonished to learn of the amenities their government mentally attaches to them.

For many, a hot plate is both stove and oven, and a cracked washbowl in a shared bathroom is likely to be the "kitchen sink." In all but the summer months a window sill as often as not serves as the refrigerator. Most of the people I have met tell me they buy groceries not in bulk but in remarkably small amounts—no more than they can carry home—and usually from neighborhood stores that charge top prices.

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The Harvard-based Physicians Task Force on Hunger declared hunger to be "a national health epidemic" affecting up to 20 million citizens.

Many Eligibles Receive No Stamps

If we had no other evidence but the foregoing, we could safely conclude that while many food stamp recipients may at times go hungry, by no means every hungry person collects food stamps. The system both provides too little and assumes too much.

Numerical confirmation comes from a 1985 national study, which indicates that fewer than half of those eligible actually participate in the food stamp program. The study, moreover, singles out older Americans as among the least likely to request stamp assistance.

Richard D. Coe, an economist at the University of South Florida, conducted the federally-funded survey, which he called a "Longitudinal Analysis of Nonparticipation in the Food Stamp Program by Elderly Households." Those households, he reported, "were significantly more likely to believe they did not qualify for food stamps. . . ." The inference seems inescapable that at least four million aged persons—double the number who collect food stamps—go hungry some of the time.

Coe speculated that many older Americans mistake the food stamp program for "a welfare program such as AFDC, which . . . is limited to households with children." Still another reason relates to the oblique manner in which Congress arranged to reduce stamp benefits. By nickel-and-dimeing poor people to death through seemingly miniscule changes in eligibility standards, Congress and the USDA created a bureaucratic gorilla that many of the aged would rather shun than wrestle.

To be eligible for food stamps you must prove you have a low income and few financial assets or, in federal parlance, "resources." The resource limits in 1984 were the same as in 1975: \$3,000 for the elderly and \$1,500 for all other households.

In setting income limits, Congress devised a complicated formula while gradually granting concessions to the aged and disabled. Monthly "net income" is computed on the basis of a variety of deductions from "gross income" (which for the elderly includes Social Security), some applying to everyone, others exclusively to favored groups. For openers, there is a "standard deduction," which in 1984 came to \$89 for younger households and to double that sum for older ones (ages 60 and over). Additional deductions for everyone relate to the expenses of child care, work,

utilities and housing. The elderly and disabled also get deductions for medical expenses.

Once those disparate sums have been computed, a family's net income can be established, and if it does not exceed the limit, the family becomes eligible for food stamps. In 1984 the monthly maximum income levels were \$415 for a single person and \$560 for a couple.

These rules and their exceptions may sound mild enough in the telling, but in their bureaucratic applications they can become a nightmare, especially for the aged poor, who may have more trouble than most seeing, hearing and understanding the finer points.

The atmosphere at many food stamp centers, in any case, is hardly conducive to productive mental effort: it can be dirty, noisy and devoid of the simplest amenities. In one center I visited in Miami, I had to walk up two flights of stairs to get to the bathroom—an impossible trip for many of the older applicants.

The key to completion is documentation, and there is where much of the trouble lies. Documents are mainly for the young and the affluent. Older people often misplace their official life records; poorer people are less likely to possess them in the first place. Thus the elderly poor have less chance than anyone of finding the personal documents they need to establish food stamp eligibility.

The double deduction for aged applicants is a case in point. In Chicago I met a black woman whose appearance was instantly certifiable as elderly—she was actually in her seventies—but who lacked the papers necessary to convince food stamp officials. Born in the rural South, she could not produce a birth certificate. "If you don't have a birth certificate," a welfare worker told her, "you don't get the double deduction." When I saw this woman a few hours later, she was still in tears. For want of a credential, she had lost out on about \$30 a month in stamps.

So we have reached the end of our statistical odyssey without ever capturing the prize. The number of hungry older Americans at present may be as low as four million or as high as six million. Who knows? And who among our policy-makers can say it matters? Would a couple of million fewer hungry in the land allay our anxieties or diminish our obligations?

The question seems morally moot—but is it? The Chicago sociologist Robert Hunter pointed out in 1904 that "Some people find it difficult to understand how the savage tribes can leave the aged behind to die of starvation." For some in present-day America the difficulty may not appear all that insuperable. The issue is still being debated. □

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